Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

TESTIMONY OF GEORGE J. MANNINA, JR.
ON H.R. 2798 ON BEHALF OF
SOUTHEAST ALASKA SEINERS ASSOCIATION,
UNITED SOUTHEAST ALASKA GILLNETTERS, AND
ALASKA TROLLERS ASSOCIATION
May 18, 2000

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to appear before the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans on behalf of the Southeast Alaska Seiners Association, United Southeast Alaska Gillnetters, and Alaska Trollers Association. These organizations endorse H.R. 2798 with a few suggested amendments.

It may be best to begin considering H.R. 2798 in its historic context. Anyone among you who has had the pleasure of reading the journals of Lewis and Clark knows that in August of 1805, as the Corps of Discovery crossed the Lemhi Pass they not only crossed the Continental Divide and the westernmost boundary of the Louisiana Territory, but they passed into a place where salmon had a central role in the cultural, religious and economic fabric of society. For the many tribes of Native Americans who lived in the West, salmon was a central part of their existence.

Lewis and Clark tell us of Indian men and women using fish traps or simply spearing what Merriweather Lewis called "this most abundant fish." The wild and unruly Columbia River was lined with villages; each filled with drying racks onto which the bountiful salmon harvest was spread.

Lewis and Clark were among the first white men to see and appreciate the significance of salmon to the peoples of the Pacific Northwest - but they were certainly not the last. Since that famed expedition which opened the Northwest to a new age of discovery by settlers from the East, salmon has continued to play a critical role in the life of the region.

Perhaps no place else in the country is this more true than in Alaska. Although unknown to Lewis and Clark, the rugged and wild streams of Alaska were home to equally significant salmon runs. Even today, coastal Alaska moves to the rhythm of the salmon. With the approach of the salmon fishing season, sleepy coastal villages transform themselves, bustling with activity as fishermen prepare their boats and gear for the arrival of the fish. Streets that have lain quiet through the long Alaska in winter now host crowds of tourists eager for a place on a charter boat and the challenge of the harvest. Processing workers pour into town ready to pack the catch for shipment around the globe.

The rhythm of the fish and the fisheries rolls like a cresting wave through the long days and the summer months until the salmon wash through and up the autumn streams. In the wake of the fish, coastal life slows, with time for community, for celebration, and for storing the boats and the gear for next year's salmon.

Salmon is indeed part of the essential fabric of life in the coastal communities of Alaska. In fact, fishing is the number one employer in Alaska. In many regions of Alaska, commercial fisheries generate over fifty percent (50%) of the basic private sector employment. Over 250,000 residents of the lower 48 and Hawaii buy sport fishing licenses each year. Added to that are the 150,000 sport fishers who live in Alaska. And for the residents of remote areas of Alaska, subsistence fisheries are crucial for they are an integral part of native and rural cultures and survival.

When compared to every other industry in Alaska, commercial fisheries are number one in terms of producing personal income for the residents of this great State - and salmon is the bedrock of these commercial fisheries. In fact, today, corporations cannot own salmon fishing rights. Only individuals can own a salmon fishing license and harvest the fish. It is this fact, coupled with the abundant salmon runs, that accounts for the fact that the salmon fisheries are the most important in Alaska in terms of producing personal income for the state's residents.

But it was not always so. Before statehood, the vast salmon resources of the Alaska Territory were managed by the federal government. Salmon fishing was allowed six days a week using technology such as fish traps, which allowed virtually none of the migrating salmon to pass through to their spawning grounds. The net result of federal management was that vital salmon stocks were collapsing.

A fact little known outside of Alaska, but a memory that remains vivid for Alaskans, is that a principal force behind the drive for statehood was to rescue, protect, and restore the natural resources of the state. Four different sections of that most fundamental document of statehood, the State Constitution, proclaim and establish the policy of restoring, conserving, and protecting the fishery and other natural resources of Alaska for present and future generations.

Today, salmon fishing is strictly regulated. Fish traps are now outlawed. Corporations cannot own salmon fishing rights. Under state law, timber companies observe mandatory buffer zones along salmon spawning streams. Mining activities are subject to strict regulatory review. Water quality throughout the state is carefully monitored and regulated. As a consequence of these types of efforts, Alaska's salmon runs have largely been restored.

But the mistakes of the past took time to rectify. In the mid-1970s salmon runs were still low, averaging 21 million fish each year. But time and commitment produced stunning results. In 1999, the salmon run in Alaska was a record 216 million fish. And this is not a one-year phenomenon, but a steadily upward trend because fishermen had accepted steep harvest reductions in the past in order to allow salmon stocks to rebuild.

Mr. Chairman, to give you some idea of the scope of the commitment of the State of Alaska and its residents to maintaining the salmon fishery and salmon habitat, you should know not only of the importance of salmon to individual fishermen and to the personal income and subsistence needs of Alaskans, but you must also know that there are 2,500 separate streams in Southeast Alaska alone which support one or more species of salmon. This labyrinth of streams and numerous salmon runs have been preserved and protected by the State which, pursuant to its constitutional policy, has placed the highest priority on its fishery and other natural resources. This commitment to resource conservation may be without parallel. It is a deliberate choice made by the people of Alaska. It is a decision to forego certain economic development opportunities in order to pursue a different path. And it is a path that distinguishes Alaska from other states.

Other states confronted different needs and moved along different paths. The unruly and turbulent Columbia

River that was braved by Lewis and Clark brought with it the all too frequent threat of floods - and a burgeoning population sought protection, power, and a new economic pathway. For these reasons, the issue of salmon habitat restoration has more urgency in other parts of the Pacific Northwest than in Alaska. That is not to say that the choices made in Alaska have all been good in each individual instance and that there is not more work which can, and should, be done to improve salmon habitat. It is to say, however, that the needs of the four states named in H.R. 2798 are different. While there is some very important salmon habitat restoration and improvement work yet to be done in Alaska, salmon habitat restoration is not the principal problem confronting the Alaska salmon fishery.

For these reasons, we urge that H.R. 2798 be amended so that the monies made available can be used not only for salmon habitat restoration, but also for other purposes such as research on salmon, salmon enhancement, and salmon conservation and management. In this way, each state will be able to fashion a memorandum of understanding as required by the legislation that will be specific to its unique circumstances. If you wish, we will be pleased to offer suggested amendments for your review and consideration.

One of the issues which is also important to Alaskans is regional cooperation and regional action. We are very pleased with section 3(d) of H.R. 2798 which allows a State or qualified tribe to use the assistance provided for in the bill for activities conducted outside of its jurisdiction if that activity will provide conservation benefits to naturally produced salmon in the State.

The facts are that the greatest threat to the salmon fishermen of Alaska comes not from within Alaska, but from without. It is sadly ironic that after enduring a long and difficult process of rebuilding its salmon resources through the 1970s and 1980s, Alaska now faces the difficulties associated with restoring the salmon of the Pacific Northwest and of British Columbia.

As you know, salmon migrate great distances from their streams of origin. Some salmon from Washington, Oregon and British Columbia leave their spawning streams and turn right, spending a significant portion of their ocean life cycle in waters off Alaska. While none of the salmon originating in Alaskan streams are listed, or even proposed for listing, under the Endangered Species Act, that is not the case for certain species in the lower 48, small numbers of which migrate to Alaska and may be harvested there.

The problems associated with restoring depleted, threatened and endangered salmon stocks in other states, and in British Columbia, present major problems for Alaska salmon fishermen and for the Alaska economy. For example, Alaska salmon fishermen harvest about 290,000 chinook salmon each year. Of that amount, between 1988-1997 an average of 169 or just under 0.06% were Snake River fall chinook, a run listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. By way of contrast, in the 1970s, the chinook salmon harvest by Alaska salmon fishermen was around 360,000 fish per year. Today's significantly reduced fishing levels reflect the impact of the Endangered Species Act and the Pacific Salmon Treaty on Alaska. And to put today's reduced harvest levels into further perspective, it should be noted that because the Alaskan harvest of Snake River fall chinook is so small, the harvest of about 10,000 salmon originating in Alaskan waters would have to be given up to ensure that just one additional fish might return to the spawning grounds - assuming that fish survives the other threats it confronts in the ocean environment.

A similar, and perhaps more significant, story can be told about British Columbia salmon stocks. About one in ten salmon caught in Alaskan waters originates in Canada. Despite the fact that Canada has taken less care of its habitat than is the case in Alaska, has deliberately over-harvested some species, and has focused on hatchery production rather than natural runs, Canada has sought restrictions on Alaska fishermen in order

to protect the depleted British Columbia salmon stocks. But for every one Canadian origin salmon migrating through Alaska waters which Alaska fishermen let go by to help restore Canada's depleted runs, Alaska salmon fishermen must give up the harvest of ten Alaska origin salmon. For example, the recently renegotiated Pacific Salmon Treaty as it relates to Alaska's Noyes Island Fishery limits Alaska interception of Canadian origin sockeye salmon which migrate through Alaskan waters to 2.45% of the total harvest of that salmon run. This means that salmon fishermen in Alaska must give up the opportunity to harvest over 5 million Alaska origin salmon in order to avoid harvesting Canadian origin fish.

Mr. Chairman, salmon conservation is not only a matter of concern to each state, but it is a regional issue as well because the problems afflicting the salmon resource in one area can be visited upon the fishermen of another area. For example, if a determination is made that none of the 169 listed Snake River fall chinook could be taken in Alaska, it would shut down the entire Alaska chinook fishery. And as I noted a moment ago, there would also be dire consequences if Alaska's fishermen were told to forego the harvest of millions of Alaska origin salmon to assist in the recovery of British Columbia salmon runs. But these consequences would not be limited to fishermen. There would also be severe consequences for the Alaska origin salmon which could no longer be harvested. It is a sad reality of nature that too much of a good thing can present a problem. If Alaska fishermen are forced to shut down large segments of their fishery because of concerns about intercepting the few protected species which happen to migrate northward through Alaska waters and intermingle with, and become indistinguishable from, healthy Alaska runs, then hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of unharvested fish will crowd the spawning grounds causing overpopulation problems and creating severe population declines.

Mr. Chairman, the reality of the past was that one of the principal forces behind the drive for statehood in Alaska was the desire to protect and to conserve the State's fishery resources. The reality of the present is that the State has done an excellent job of restoring its salmon resources.

But the other reality of the present is that salmon from regions that have chosen, or been forced to choose, a different path migrate through Alaskan waters and some people see restricting the harvest of Alaskan salmon fishermen as the solution to their problems. But, as I noted above, the Alaska salmon runs coming from the over 2500 streams in Southeast Alaska alone are healthy. Restricting the harvest of these fish not only penalizes Alaska and its citizens for their management practices, but could create conservation problems for the healthy Alaskan salmon stocks.

Mr. Chairman, H.R. 2798 is a good bill. But we urge you to consider the fact that the problems of salmon conservation confronted by each State are different --- and we urge you to amend the purposes for which funds can be expended under H.R.2798 to reflect the different needs of each state.

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